

The Link

SECONDARY

THE SPEECH & LANGUAGE MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOLS

Words matter

– WHY WE SHOULD
BE USING POSITIVE
DESCRIPTORS AROUND
LEARNERS WITH SLCN
PAGE 16



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5
2025

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**WHY SPEECH AND LANGUAGE ARE
THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ORACY**
Page 4



**LINKING LEARNING FROM
INTERVENTIONS – THE
SECONDARY CHALLENGE**
Page 6



**HOW FOREST SCHOOL
CAN PROVIDE INVALUABLE
COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES**
Page 10

Hello and welcome to the first issue of The Link for 2025.

Words – what we say and how we say them—are powerful. While we may think this is obvious, it's worth pausing to reflect on how we sometimes, unintentionally, undermine the potential of our students with the language we use. In this issue, we're focusing on the vocabulary we choose to describe our students and, more importantly, how we can rethink the way we view their strengths and challenges.

It's all too easy for some students to fall into a cycle of negativity, where their behaviours or traits are labelled as "bad" or "poor." But what if we could flip this narrative and recognise the positives in what might initially seem like negative traits? For example, a student who tends to react impulsively might be

someone who shows strength and decisiveness in a crisis. It's about reframing and appreciating the qualities that may be misunderstood.

On page 16, **Alison Fowle**, specialist speech and language therapist describes how learners, especially those with SLCN, can really benefit from positive descriptors to help shift negative perceptions and reinforce strengths.

Sam Garner, mental health and inclusion consultant, continues this theme in her article by helping our students to identify their strengths and to believe in themselves—both impacting hugely on their mental health. Visit page 8 for her advice on how we can boost our students' self-esteem.

In our Ask a therapist regular feature, **Emma Price** gives her top tips for providing activities for students who struggle at break

times and identifies the language skills that can developed when playing board games (page 14).

I really hope you enjoy the Link Community pages at the end of the magazine and feel inspired to contribute your own experiences and practices. Our readers would love to hear from you, and your insights could make a real difference to others in the field.

A big thank you for reading The Link! Please share this issue with colleagues online at: tinyurl.com/dy8jhxxu

Have a good term.



*Editor, The Link magazine
Speech & Language Link –
award-winning assessments
and support for SLCN.*

CONTENTS

regular features

3

SLCN GLOSSARY – SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DISORDER

13

ONE TA TO ANOTHER

By The Link editor

14-15

ASK A THERAPIST

By Emma Price, specialist speech and language therapist

18-19

THE LINK COMMUNITY PAGES

4-5

THE VITAL ROLE OF SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ORACY

By Kate Freeman, consultant – speech and language in education

6-7

LINKING LEARNING FROM INTERVENTIONS – THE SECONDARY CHALLENGE

By Abi Joachim, Institute SEND Specialist, Academy Transformation Trust

8-9

SELF-ESTEEM – THE KEY ELEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH

By Sam Garner, mental health and inclusion consultant

10-11

NATTER IN NATURE

By Juliet Leonard, specialist speech and language therapist

12

THE LINK LIVE 2024 – THEMES FROM THE DAY

16-17

THE WORDS WE USE MATTER

By Alison Fowle, specialist speech and language therapist



glossary

vocabulary interventions **SLCN** speech literacy **ASD** sounds

COMMUNICATION

understanding
Social skills



Excerpted from: The Ultimate Guide to SLCN
By **Sophie Mustoe-Playfair** and **Louise Burton**,
specialist speech and language therapists

Facts about SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DISORDER

Social Communication Disorder (SCD) is a relatively new diagnosis, first defined in 2013. Before this time, children may have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) because one of the primary features of ASD is social communication difficulties. However, there is evidence that there is a group of students who have significant difficulties with social communication who do not present with the other features of ASD, such as a restricted range of interests and repetitive behaviours. It is these students who can now be diagnosed with SCD.

Children with SCD have trouble using spoken language and non-verbal communication skills in a socially appropriate way. They can construct sentences appropriately but struggle with the 'pragmatics' or 'unspoken rules' of conversation and social interactions. At present there are no known causes of SCD.

There is evidence that children with SCD are at a higher risk for experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and it has been suggested that a high proportion of children who access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) may have SCD which has previously been undiagnosed.

SCD is a lifelong diagnosis and the prognosis is highly variable. Some individuals make considerable progress, and their functional difficulties are minimised with support, while for others the difficulties persist into adulthood.

What to look for:

- Social communication difficulties can lead to negative behaviour arising from frustration
- They may easily, and unintentionally, upset other students because of their impaired social interaction skills
- SCD can impact on academic attainment and often experience difficulties with reading comprehension

Difficulties include:

- During conversation, frequently going off topic or dominating the conversation
- Problems adapting language to different listeners
- Poor understanding of how to appropriately greet people, make requests, or gain attention
- Problems making inferences and understanding information which is implied but not explicitly stated

Strategies to support SCD learners:

- 💡 Pre-teaching topic vocabulary has been found to be successful in improving language comprehension skills and promoting engagement in learning
- 💡 Social skills interventions, particularly those addressing misunderstandings, e.g., comic strip stories (*Carol Gray, 1994) can be useful to unpick problematic interactions and teach specific interaction skills
- 💡 It's important to remember that pragmatic language skills need to be taught explicitly and practised in real contexts to support generalisation of any new skills learnt



The Ultimate Guide to SLCN has been written by speech and language therapists to provide strategies and tips to help you support your SLCN learners.

Access this essential online handbook for free when you sign up to The Link Community here:



* <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>

The vital role of speech, language, and communication skills in developing **ORACY**



By **Kate Freeman, consultant**
— speech and language in education

Oracy, described as the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding, and engage verbally with others, relies heavily on its building blocks: speech, language, and communication (SLC) skills. Nurturing these skills is crucial for fostering effective communication and learning in the classroom.

Oracy is often referred to as the fourth 'R' alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic. The Oracy Commission's recent report "*We need to talk*" highlights oracy's pivotal role in students' academic and social development, enabling participation in discussions, clear expression of thought, and collaboration with peers. This enhances students' learning experiences and preparation for future success in the workplace and society.

Educationally, research has shown that oracy-rich approaches can positively impact students' academic performance, particularly in reading and writing. Relying heavily on underpinning SLC skills, students are better equipped to understand and interpret texts, express their ideas clearly, and engage in critical thinking.

The role of speech, language, and communication

SLC skills are foundational in oracy. Without strong SLC skills, students struggle to access an orally delivered curriculum, participate in class discussions, and build strong peer relationships. At secondary school, especially, students with language difficulties are more likely to be noticed for behaviour that challenges, poor academic progress, or social, emotional, and mental health difficulties.

Staff can support students by recognising any speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN), working with students to understand their needs, and to build their skills effectively.

Practical strategies for developing oracy

- ✓ **Encourage awareness of misunderstandings:** teach students to listen attentively to their peers and respond thoughtfully. Identify common reasons for misunderstandings, e.g., background noise, unknown vocabulary, or vague words

- ✓ **Promote discussion:** create opportunities to engage in discussions on various topics. Recognise that some students may need more time to plan their contributions. Use mind maps, writing, and other visuals to help
- ✓ **Pre-teach and use varied vocabulary:** consider using both phonological hooks (e.g., number of syllables, rhyming words) and semantic hooks (e.g., meanings, origins). Use pre-taught vocabulary in various contexts to ensure repeated exposure
- ✓ **Provide feedback:** discuss common concerns that everyone has about their own communication. Encourage students' reflection on their strengths and highlight positive aspects of how they and others communicate
- ✓ **Incorporate technology:** utilise digital tools and resources to support SLC and oracy development (such as *Secondary Language Link*). Apps, online platforms, and interactive games can make learning more engaging and accessible

The role of teachers, TAs and SENCOs

All staff play a crucial role in fostering oracy in schools. It is the responsibility of all adults to recognise the impact of SLC skills and identify students who may be struggling. Specific roles include:

- **Teachers:** ensure screening for SLCN. Integrate oracy activities into everyday lessons. Use open-ended questions, encouraging discussion and giving students time to articulate their thoughts.
- **TAs:** provide targeted support to students struggling with SLC (through small group work or one-on-one sessions). Assist in creating an inclusive classroom environment where all students can use their SLC skills.
- **SENCOs:** support SLCN screening and develop intervention strategies as part of the school's overall SEND provision. Provide training for staff on effective oracy techniques. Monitor the progress of students with SLCN.

Ensuring that all students, including those with SLCN, develop strong oracy skills is a key aspect of inclusive education. Students with SLCN may face additional challenges, but with the right support, they make significant progress.

Inclusive classroom practices for oracy

- ✓ **Adaptive teaching:** tailor oracy activities to meet all students' needs. Use visual aids, break tasks into smaller steps, or provide extra time for students to formulate responses

- ✓ **Peer support:** encourage peer-to-peer learning by pairing students and discussing positive aspects of communication used. This can build confidence and create a supportive learning environment
- ✓ **Celebrating diversity:** recognise and celebrate different ways of communicating and discuss how this can vary in different contexts. Encourage students to share their cultural backgrounds and languages

Professional development for staff

Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers, TAs and SENCOs to stay updated with the latest research and best practices in SLC and oracy education. Workshops, training sessions, and collaborative learning opportunities help staff develop necessary skills for supporting students effectively.



Areas for professional development include:

- **Understanding SLCN:** gain a deeper understanding of various speech, language, and communication needs and effective strategies for supporting them
- **Effective oracy techniques:** learn about different oracy techniques and activities that can be integrated into the classroom
- **Using technology:** explore how digital tools and resources can support oracy development

The Secondary Language Link SLCN Toolkit is CPD accredited and offers 2 training modules that can be completed by all staff.

Find out more: tinyurl.com/3bmzdza3

Conclusion

Fostering oracy is essential for education and life skills. By focusing on underpinning SLC development, educators can help students build skills for academic and social success. Embracing oracy as a core component of education will prepare students for the future.

Oracy builds on fundamental skills of SLC, creating confident, articulate individuals who engage with the world around them. With the right support and strategies, every student can develop strong oracy skills, setting them on the path to success in school and beyond.

LINKING LEARNING FROM INTERVENTIONS

– the secondary challenge



By **Abi Joachim**, Institute SEND Specialist, Academy Transformation Trust

Teaching assistants form a significant and growing section of the education workforce representing 3 in every 10 members of staff in schools (DfE, 2024) and tend to be broadly deployed in two ways: supporting within the classroom and delivering structured interventions. The evidence for positive impact is currently stronger for the latter, where teaching assistants deliver one-to-one and small group interventions, which often take place outside of the classroom. These interventions are most effective when they are delivered with fidelity, are brief (15-45 minutes), regular (3-5 times per week) and sustained (8-20 weeks) and when extensive training is provided for those leading sessions (EEF, 2021). In these conditions, studies have found an average of five months progress in primary schools and four months in secondary schools (EEF, 2024).

It is important to recognise that “teachers are accountable for the progress of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff” and that “high quality teaching, differentiated for individual pupils, is the first step in responding to pupils who have or may have SEN” (SEND Code of Practice, 2014). It is therefore essential that interventions are carefully selected and planned to limit the time pupils are out of the classroom and monitored effectively to ensure maximum impact.

However, even when interventions are delivered in this evidence-informed way, there is still a risk that the learning will be isolated to these sessions and, I would argue, this risk is higher in secondary settings. It is important that explicit connections are made between the learning taking place in structured interventions and the learning in the classroom so pupils do not have to make these connections for themselves, which would be, at best,

ineffective. This poses a challenge in all phases but can be particularly difficult in secondary schools due to the structure of the timetable and the volume of different teachers each pupil encounters across a typical week. While there is no perfect answer to this issue, here are three areas that will need consideration to facilitate this transfer of learning.

1. Knowing needs

The assessment process is essential to identify barriers to learning and therefore determine which interventions may be suitable to address these needs. This is the first step of the assess, plan, do, review cycle and involves collaboration between the SENDCo, class teachers, parents/carers and pupils. By building an awareness of pupils’ needs, relevant targets can be set to specify the intended outcome of any intervention that is put in place. This common understanding then supports teachers and teaching assistants to link learning between interventions and the classroom through a common language of assessment and a focus on targeted outcomes.

2. Communication is key

Effective communication channels are crucial, but this will require more explicit planning in secondary schools where teaching assistants tend to work with a range of different teachers, sometimes across a variety of subject areas. This might be enabled through department-based deployment, where teaching assistants are linked to a specific subject team and therefore work closely with these teachers to connect interventions and the classroom curriculum. Alternatively, allocated times for collaborative planning, such as after school sessions, or digital communication methods, like email or SharePoint, can aid this process. Through these discussions, teaching assistants are able to develop an awareness

References

- DfE (2014) SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- DfE (2024) School workforce in England: November 2023 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>
- EEF (2021) Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/teaching-assistants>
- EEF (2024) Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Teaching Assistant Interventions <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/teaching-assistant-interventions>

of the learning taking place in the classroom and how this links to the intervention they are delivering. This allows the learning to be reinforced and extended within the sessions, developing clear links for pupils.

3. Sharing strategies

Finally, structured interventions will work on specific strategies, which are practiced within sessions, but for these to become integrated and embedded they must also be built into classroom learning. Clear recording and reporting systems allow teaching assistants to share learning and related strategies from intervention sessions with class teachers, either directly or through the SENDCo, to allow teachers to plan how these will be incorporated into lessons.

While the evidence suggests that, under the right conditions, deploying teaching assistants to deliver structured interventions can have a positive impact on learner outcomes, it is clear that many factors need to be considered to ensure this is effective. The structure of secondary settings poses additional challenges around communication and collaborative working between teachers and teaching assistants, which could limit the impact of interventions. The suggestions in this article provide a starting point to begin exploring how your setting could mitigate these challenges to ensure clear learning connections between interventions and the classroom.

OUR THERAPIST SAYS:

SECONDARY
LanguageLink



Secondary Language Link

can support schools to link targeted interventions with classroom learning. All staff can access student data and view assessment results, recommendations, and current interventions both at an individual and whole class level. This allows teachers to easily incorporate the most appropriate strategies into their lessons, and quickly see what students are working on in their intervention groups, allowing them to incorporate current targeted skills into their own subjects. Students also complete a Communication Contract, detailing the skills they have worked on in groups and how adults can best support them in the classroom. The SLCN Toolkit online training resource supports all school staff to improve inclusive teaching practice across the curriculum, allowing for more efficient communication about supporting students' needs across the school.

Visit tinyurl.com/3bmzdza3 for more information and to sign up for a free trial



SELF-ESTEEM

- the key element in mental health

LINK LIVE
2024
SPEAKER



By **Sam Garner**, Mental Health and Inclusion Consultant and former SENCo

When I am training in mental health, I often ask adults how their self-esteem is. "Ok say some," "not so good say others." I then ask them to think about the negative beliefs they hold about themselves, specifically when did they start. Most of the beliefs about ourselves begin before the age of 16, and we carry them into adulthood.

Throughout daily life we will then develop a cognitive bias about ourselves which means we only really notice events that reinforce our beliefs. It's like when you buy a new car, you then notice that so many people seem to have the same car as you, but you didn't notice that before. If you think you're bad at something, you will focus on events that support that.

The important thing about self-esteem is that it has a huge, huge impact on our mental health and, importantly for the education world, it impacts our learning. Believing in yourself and your abilities is so powerful. It isn't about



believing you are great and can conquer everything—that comes under bad positive thinking. It's about being able to recognise your strengths and weaknesses and being ok with that. Knowing you will persevere and be ok. It's also no surprise that our self-esteem has a strong link to our resilience.

I often ask educational settings; how do you boost the self-esteem of your students? What do you do? Many answers relate to award systems, but does this work? Research suggests not, and it is often only related to academic achievement. Look into *self-determination theory if you want to find out more about that.

We use reward systems because we don't potentially know how else to boost self-esteem. Here are some ways you may wish to think about to boost the self-esteem of students.

Valuing the whole student

We have to reinforce the message that academic results are one measure of a person but not the only measure. Children grow up believing they aren't loveable because they are not academic. We must reinforce that this isn't the case by recognising all qualities and talents. We need to provide multiple opportunities for all children to thrive, demonstrate their talents and be recognised (and not just in those areas that will be valued by external inspectors). We must value a wide range of skills and abilities as is the case in the world outside education. Many studies have shown that in essence people do business with people they like. People form relationships with people they like. What grade they received in their Maths GCSE doesn't have a bearing on this. N.B. I'm not dismissing academic achievements, I'm merely stating that they are not everything, they are a stepping stone. (Also, believing in yourself will produce better results!)

Ensure that you are aware of, and recognise, achievements outside of school. Ask parents and students to let you know about the successes they have achieved beyond the school gates and share with other staff and students.

Look at your school reporting system. If it's just based on academic levels, can it be changed to report on student strengths outside of this? I don't mean rewarding effort, an A for effort and an F for achievement doesn't make me feel better about myself. Also ensure that you don't just use deficit language—focus on strengths not just the things they struggle with. Consider

What can we improve?
How can we do more?
Imagine fostering an
environment where students
truly believe in themselves.
Schools have the power
to make that positive
difference.

kindness, friendship skills, speaking in front of others, empathy, tenacity etc. There are a whole host of skills that will benefit them in life and having them recognised will boost their self-esteem.

Inclusion

Are all students accepted in your setting and feel like they belong? Think about SEN, EAL, LGBTQ+, BAME students. Do you have a wide range of school clubs that embrace all students that are not just PE, Music/Drama based? Think cookery, knitting, Warhammer, Gaming, Film Club, Chess Club. Older students can run the clubs or ask for external volunteers to help. Clubs will promote skills and friendships.

Develop individual relationships

Why not try something as simple as saying hello to each student and starting each lesson or day with a compliment. There are lots of videos on YouTube where teachers' welcome students with a handshake into the classroom. Building positive relationships with students and acknowledging their existence regularly is the

simplest, but most effective, thing we can do to boost self-esteem. Knowing we matter to someone is important to self-esteem. It makes a difference.

Ask the student

We don't consult with students enough. Ask them, "What do we do that makes you feel bad about yourself?" "What can we do to make you feel better about yourself?" "How can we help boost your self-esteem?" Simply involving them in these conversations demonstrates that their feelings and perspectives matter. Consulting them is showing that they matter.

We must strive to be a protective factor for students' mental health, and a great starting point is to reflect on our impact on their self-esteem. What can we improve? How can we do more? Imagine fostering an environment where students truly believe in themselves. Schools have the power to make that positive difference.

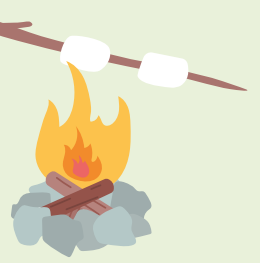
* <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>





NATTER IN NATURE:

How Forest school can provide invaluable communication opportunities

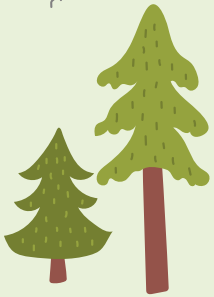


By **Juliet Leonard**, specialist speech and language therapist

An increasing number of UK secondary schools and specialist provisions are channelling the powers of an on or off-site Forest School. The benefits to learning, independence, pupil and teacher engagement and mental wellbeing are plentiful, as the growing body of research shows. Utilising outdoor space for language opportunities is here to stay.

My own experience of delivering interventions with older students in Forest School has enabled me to see the positive impact on speech, language and communication and how this setting naturally lends itself to semi-structured intervention opportunities.

I was delighted to make contact with speech and language therapist, Jess Drake recently. Jess really values the benefits of outdoor therapy to support students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). So much so, she completed her training as a Forest School leader in 2009. Here Jess shares her experiences of using Forest School to provide high quality educational experiences in the natural world.



The more I worked with students in the classroom, the more I wanted to take them outside. There are SO many merits and the ethos of Forest School connects with many of our interventions—it's a natural space that allows for communication.

There are many imaginative opportunities to supporting **storytelling** skills whilst being outdoors. There is something about sitting around the fire, having a warm drink that makes for a natural place to tell stories. Students can use natural resources and materials to create props to structure narrative. Often curriculum-based texts can be reinforced using incidental learning opportunities outside.

There is a natural space to play people games. Talking walks, or nature walks using their senses to explore the area provides opportunities for interaction and for curiosity, prompting deeper questions involving reasoning and judgement. Students can also **work together** to solve problems and create spaces or learning opportunities.

A higher adult to student ratio and having access to skilled adults, facilitating students to develop **self-esteem and a 'try again' approach**. This sense of achievement gives students the excitement of something to talk about. Ongoing sessions help to build up a resilience to ever-changing weather, as well as become independent in preparing for what





they need to wear. Students are included in the planning and preparation of activities which helps to develop their organisation and self-help skills.

Forest School advocates that sessions should take place over the long term and follow a familiar routine. Although I'm working as an outdoor therapist, I try to follow this. I will always have targets in mind and will loosely plan sessions in advance, however, I am fully prepared to be flexible with these plans and let the students lead!

There is something about being outdoors that has a positive impact on a student's ability to engage. The following can help best support/prepare for sessions:

- 🍃 A high adult to student ratio is essential so there will be an adult available to facilitate the student who is struggling
- 🍃 Having a loose structure, a familiar routine and sessions over time so the student knows what to expect—this predictability supports a safe space for learning and focussing
- 🍃 Giving the student space to develop and ensuring that activities are pitched at the right level with the right support so that the student feels like they may fail before they have even started
- 🍃 Getting to know the student in advance of sessions



After speaking to Jess, it is clear to see that Forest Schools offer a natural and dynamic setting that boosts communication through curiosity, imaginative play, and collaboration. Its ethos aligns well with speech and language work, offering students an engaging space to develop communication skills while enjoying the many benefits of nature. So pull your wellies on, wrap up warm and get your class outside to have a good old natter in nature!



THE LINK LIVE 2024

Thank you to the 800+ individuals who registered for a ticket for The Link Live speech and language day 2024. All who registered for a ticket received a CPD UK certificate.

It was a truly wonderful day, beginning with Gary Aubin's engaging opening presentation and culminating in the inspiring contributions from Ioan Berry and his family. The live chat was buzzing with your questions and comments and reflected the incredible passion and commitment delegates had for supporting SLCN. There were several themes that were woven throughout the day.

Screening tools emerged as a key theme of discussion. Many participants shared positive feedback about using Language Link in their settings, praising its user-friendly design and the success they've achieved with their students.

Participants explored practical approaches to assessments for secondary school students, particularly those tailored for SLCN. There was significant interest in effective interventions for students with autism and ADHD, highlighting the need for tools that are both evidence-based and adaptable to individual needs.

Another key topic of interest was the Secondary Language Link communication passports. Delegates were eager to explore how these could be implemented to better support students, especially those who may struggle with traditional communication methods. This discussion seamlessly tied into a broader conversation about promoting inclusivity and ensuring that every student's unique needs are acknowledged and addressed.



Overall, the day provided high-quality engaging presentations with discussions that highlighted a shared commitment to utilising innovative tools and strategies to provide a whole school approach to SLCN while maintaining a focus on practicality, accessibility, and inclusivity in education.

Host, Kate Freeman, said, *"We all have a role to play, and by recognising our strengths, we can commit to doing more and doing it better. We know that continuing professional development (CPD) is key to helping us on this journey."*



We would also like to extend a huge thank you to our wonderful hosts, Kate Freeman and Yin Collighan along with the rest of our amazing presenters: Jean Gross CBE, Kylie Rio-Wood, Juliet Leonard, Alison Fowle, Sara Alston, Samantha Gamblen and Sam Garner.

The Link Live 2024 presentations will be showcased on The Link Community website along with the presentation slides from the day.

Please visit: tinyurl.com/fbvz3ecb

"Thanks to the Speech & Language Link team for organising another fabulous Link Live conference. It was reassuring to hear like-minded professionals discuss embedding a whole-school approach to SLCN and considering the universal strategies we can employ in classrooms that benefit all pupils, while being particularly useful for others. The presentation given by Ioan Berry was inspiring and reaffirmed how vital it is to listen to those with lived experience of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), so that we can offer the most appropriate and effective support."



One TA to another




A WORK EXPERIENCE CASE STUDY

By **Claire Chambers** – editor



If I had to choose a favourite student, it would be Ryan. Despite the challenges of his SLCN, his positive attitude shone through. His life centred around home and school, so work experience was a perfect opportunity to boost his confidence and independence.

Ryan's work experience was set to take place at the local bicycle shop, a choice he made himself due to his passion for cycling, and he was absolutely thrilled. For once, he felt like everyone else, as all his classmates were also going on work experience—an experience he didn't often get to share with others.

So how did we help Ryan (and other students like him), to prepare for the challenges of work experience?

Here's what we did:

I visited the bike shop and discussed Ryan's strengths—polite, enthusiastic, and passionate about bikes—and areas where he needed support, like his short attention span, misreading situations, and impulsiveness. We agreed Ryan would be on the shop floor in the morning and help with repairs in the afternoon.

Back at school we:

- Practised phrases such as, "Can I help you?" and "Do you need assistance with anything?"
- Learned key vocabulary like, 'chain lube,' 'gears,' and 'tyre pressure' using a real bike
- Role-played lots of different scenarios practising communicating with customers as well as the shop staff

How did it go?

There were a few minor incidents where Ryan attempted to 'stop' a rude customer from purchasing a bike, and the workshop team noted that there had been more repairs needed **after** Ryan's assistance. Despite this, the staff really liked him and acknowledged that they had sometimes overlooked the depth of Ryan's knowledge, which led to a few scrapes—some more literal than others!

Overall, it was a big success and showed the importance of preparation and support in helping students with speech and language needs thrive in the workplace.

Did Ryan have a great time? Yes, he did! "But next time, Miss, can I work in a skateboard shop instead? At least they don't have to fix flat tyres!"



ASK A THERAPIST



By **Emma Price**, specialist speech and language therapist

Q. “Some of our students find the unstructured nature of break times difficult to manage and will often appear lost or lonely. What can I do to support them at these times?”

A. **T**his is a good question, and one I’m sure many of you can identify with!

We know the move to secondary school from primary is a massive change for most young people. Pretty much everything they’ve ever known about school up until that point now looks very different. They need to use new skills such as reading timetables and maps to ensure they’re not late for their next lesson; remember the new faces and names of adults and peers; and encounter new subjects, including the extensive vocabulary each one brings!

However, for some students one of their biggest challenges to overcome at secondary is how they navigate their way through the busy, noisy and often overwhelming break times; ones that are typically very different to what they have known before.

Break times can be especially difficult for young people who have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), and these are often the students who spend time on their own, watching from a distance while their peers chat, laugh and play or boisterously bundle their way into the dinner hall.

Students with SLCN can find these unstructured times of the day tricky to navigate due to several reasons, such as split/ varied lunch times, mixed classes and year groups, and access to a larger school site. Every student should be able to access a break time where they can (if they choose) meet with friends, new and old, explore similar interests and hobbies and enjoy some free time away from curriculum learning.

GAMES/ACTIVITIES	SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS TARGETED AND DEVELOPED
Uno – including versions such as; ‘No Mercy’, ‘Flip’ and ‘Minecraft’ that include additional rules and cards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Decision making • Social communication • Turn taking • Following rules
Dobble – including ‘Dobble Connect’ where students work together in teams to be the fastest to connect 4 cards; as well as many other versions available depending on your students interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Semantic links/categories • Visual discrimination • Describing skills • Attention and listening • Teamwork
Top Trumps – various themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Turn taking • Comparison • Understanding of bigger/smaller numbers • Discussion
Think Words – think of words beginning with each letter of the alphabet on a specific subject e.g., food, clothes, things that swim etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn taking • Vocabulary • Semantic links/categories • Attention and listening



Most schools already have rooms where young people who find break times challenging can go. These are generally quieter environments that the young person feels safe in and are accompanied by familiar and friendly adults. But is it possible to use these safe environments for more than just providing a place of refuge for these young people?

Yes, these environments can be used for more! They can be a place where students are actively encouraged to develop and practise everyday language and communication skills through engaging and motivating activities and games—essential skills they can take with them back out to the learning environment and beyond.

Below are suggested games and activities that can be used within these rooms, each one detailing the language skills they help the young person develop and master. Remember, this is the student's break time, so it is important to discuss with them what their interests and hobbies are. We know that including things young people enjoy and are interested in (this might be very different to what you and I may enjoy!), will help to keep them engaged and motivated for longer, leaving them wanting to come back and continue developing their new skills and the friendships they are hopefully forming.



**MORE
INFO**

Join The Link Community for free resources and activities that you can use to support your students with SLCN at break and lunch times.

Sign up here: <https://tinyurl.com/7k5j89fs>



GAMES/ACTIVITIES	SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS TARGETED AND DEVELOPED
Guess Who? – guessing game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generating yes/no questions Turn taking Vocabulary Process of elimination Expressive and receptive language Memory Attention to detail Visual discrimination
Articulate! – describing game where peers guess the target word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teamwork Describing skills Vocabulary Semantics/categories Expressive language Turn taking
Lego®/construction kits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction following Teamwork Problem solving Self-confidence Understanding of concept words (e.g., rotate, transparent, rough) Attention and listening

THE WORDS WE



By **Alison Fowle**, specialist speech and language therapist

The speech and language therapy team here at Speech & Language Link is a diverse little bunch, in terms of personality, interests and previous work experience. We're a lovely mix of communicative, spontaneous, expressive, passionate, measured, thoughtful, determined... I could go on. Our differences are our strength, as the work is varied and we all bring something a little different to the table.

I've used a range of adjectives above to describe my colleagues, and doing so got me thinking about the way we talk about and label ourselves, our colleagues, and particularly the learners we work with.

Let's consider the reality for a student with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Adam is 13. He finds it difficult to focus and listen. He tries hard to understand but finds many lessons confusing and overwhelming. He needs more time than other learners to think about what he wants to say or write, which means he often falls behind. He becomes disengaged, gets frustrated, distracts those around him and is often getting into trouble.

Adam hears other learners described using words like '**sensible**', '**hard working**', '**expressive**', '**determined**' and '**thoughtful**'.

Adam hears himself described as '**impulsive**', '**stubborn**', '**demanding**' and '**a troublemaker**'.

The words that we use matter

Here are 4 benefits to using positive descriptors around learners, particularly those with SLCN:

✔ Boosting self-esteem

Positive language helps learners develop a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. This is particularly important for those with SLCN, who may face additional challenges and frustrations in communication.

✔ Encouraging motivation

Learners with SLCN often put in far more time and effort than other learners to achieve the same outcome. Feeling valued and recognised effort can inspire them to persevere through difficulties.

✔ Fostering a growth mindset

Learners with SLCN can lack resilience and be reluctant to take on new challenges. Emphasising strengths and progress encourages a growth mindset, where learners believe that their abilities can improve with effort and practice.

✔ Reducing anxiety

Positive interactions can create a supportive and safe environment, reducing feelings of anxiety and stress that may arise from communication difficulties. This can make it easier for learners with SLCN to participate and express themselves.

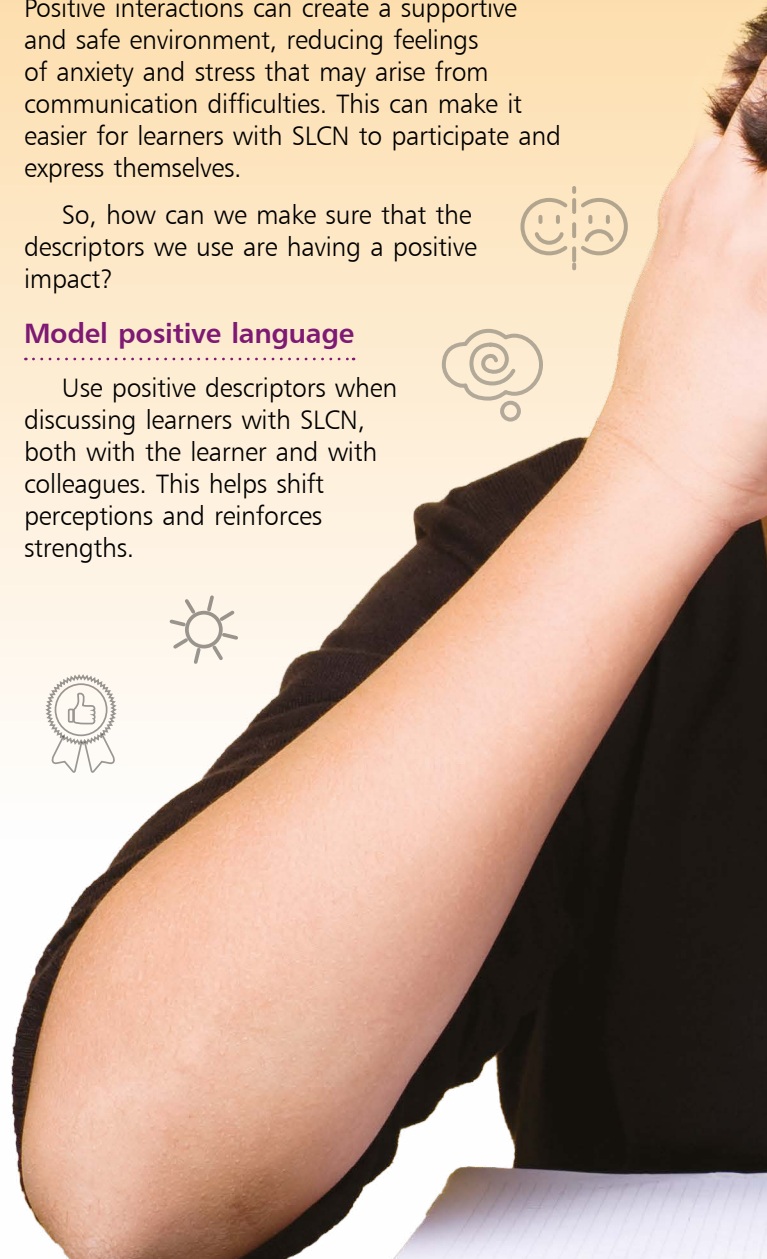
So, how can we make sure that the descriptors we use are having a positive impact?

Model positive language

Use positive descriptors when discussing learners with SLCN, both with the learner and with colleagues. This helps shift perceptions and reinforces strengths.



SENSIBLE



USE MATTER

Make sure that the words you use are understood

Learners with SLCN have gaps in their vocabulary knowledge. When you use a positive descriptor make sure that the learner has understood what the word you used means and how they relate to them.

*E.g., "I'm impressed with how **determined** you've been in this lesson. You didn't always get the answer right on the first try, but you didn't let that get you down. You kept trying and you got there in the end. That's what determined means. Well done."*

Reframe a perceived negative as a positive

Help your learner with SLCN to shift their perspective of their strengths and challenges. Thinking back to my team, I could have described my persistent and determined colleague as 'stubborn' and my spontaneous and instinctive colleague as 'impulsive' but those were not the words I chose. I used positive descriptors because, within our team, these characteristics are unique strengths and abilities which make our team stronger. Help your learner to learn how their unique characteristics might become a strength in the classroom and beyond.



STUBBORN

troublemaker

demanding



expressive



hard working



Finally, here are some examples of positive descriptors that highlight the strengths and abilities of learners with SLCN:

- ✓ **Resourceful:** Able to find effective solutions to problems using available resources.
- ✓ **Determined:** Persistently working towards goals, despite challenges.
- ✓ **Creative:** Having a strong imagination and the ability to come up with original ideas.
- ✓ **Inquisitive:** Eager to learn and curious about the world around them.
- ✓ **Perseverant:** Showing a steadfast determination to continue despite difficulties.



welcome to

The Link



THE LINK COMMUNITY

Join The Link Community for a selection of free resource materials to help you support speech, language and communication needs in the classroom. Membership is completely free and offers:

- Access to The **Ultimate Guide to SLCN** handbook (as featured on page 3)
- Our school speech and language audit tool
- Free ticket to The Link Live annual conference
- The Link magazine library
- The Link Community eNewsletter
- The Parent Portal

Sign up now at: <https://tinyurl.com/mve46pd8>



SPEECH AND LANGUAGE FAMILY SUPPORT

The **Parent Portal** is an award-winning website created by the therapy team at Speech & Language Link. Its aim is to give families access to SLCN information and to offer them easy-to-use practical resources to support their children aged 4-14 years.

What's on the site for parents and caregivers?

- **Development Charts** to work out the next steps for their child's learning and direct them to the stage-appropriate activities section
- **Everyday Activities** to incorporate listening and talking skills while carrying out everyday routines
- **Language Games** demonstrated by our therapists
- **Speech Activities and Listening Games**
- Our speech and language therapy **Podcast**

As a Link Community member, you will be able to link to the portal from your school website and personalise its heading with your school's name.

Find out more here: <https://tinyurl.com/6fnst7da>

Dates for your diary for 2025

6-7TH FEBRUARY
Tes SEND Show North 2025, Bolton

13-14TH FEBRUARY
SENSible25 Evening Quiz and SEND Conference, Nottingham

13TH FEBRUARY
The 2025 HFL SEND Conference: Sense and Sensibility, Hatfield

25TH FEBRUARY
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead 2025 SEND Conference & Exhibition, Windsor

28TH MARCH
National Pupil Premium Conference, Birmingham

22ND MAY
CST SEND and Inclusion Conference 2025, Birmingham

Community news

BECOMING A MENOPAUSE-FRIENDLY SCHOOL

Dr Mary Bilton; writer, researcher and facilitator at Still Human

In recent years, the conversation surrounding menopause has been evolving, shifting from a topic often shrouded in silence to one recognised for its significant impact on half the population at some point in their lives.

When Menopause Employment Champion, Helen Tomlinson, recently met with Still Human's founder, Julie Liddell, she said:

"Education is a key pillar of cultural change in any organisation and it's particularly important in the education sector where it is predominantly female (75%) and the roles by their very nature don't provide much in the way of autonomy from a workspace perspective.

Therefore, reasonable adjustments can be a challenge, so education and understanding are critical."

Addressing menopause openly and supportively in education settings serves as a powerful educational opportunity for staff and students alike. Furthermore, the UK's largest teaching union, the NEU, has recently stated that menopause training should be mandatory in all schools.

Key steps for becoming a menopause-friendly school:

- 👍 Education and awareness are vital, ensuring that all staff, regardless of age or gender, understand what menopause is and the impact it can have on their colleagues.
- 👍 Training sessions led by healthcare professionals can demystify menopause and provide essential information on how to support those experiencing symptoms.
- 👍 Training a Menopause Ambassador for your school is an excellent way to open up the conversation and embed an inclusive culture within organisations to understand menopause.



Dr Mary Bilton

Still Human offer online Menopause Ambassador training, and Menopause Awareness courses specifically designed for those in education settings.

Visit: www.stillhuman.co.uk for more information.

Top Tips for Supporting SLCN

Here are three practical ideas from our speech and language therapists to help you this term:

3 TOP TIPS

- 1 THINK LANGUAGE**
Focus on the underlying reasons behind behaviour by considering language challenges first.
- 2 SCREEN ALL YEAR 7 STUDENTS**
Early identification ensures students can achieve their full potential.
- 3 SHARE FINDINGS WIDELY**
Inform all staff of assessment results and recommendations so that everyone is on board.



Secondary Language Link helps build communication skills for life by:

- 👍 **Identifying language difficulties** through online standardised assessments.
- 👍 **Providing intervention** via targeted, well-resourced immersive groups.
- 👍 **Offering in-package training** with The SLCN Toolkit teacher training resource.
- 👍 **Giving support** through our Help Desk and speech and language therapy team.

Because language development doesn't stop at 11 years!

Get 15 free assessments when you take a 4-week trial.
Find out more here: www.tinyurl.com/2fsajxyu

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